

# SHIGEKO KUBOTA

## VIDEO SCULPTURE: TWO PHASES



Photo Credit: Mary Lerner



## DUCHAMPIANA SERIES

I made five "Duchampiana" sculptures, which manifest a video dialogue with death and reincarnation through the enigmatic personality of the late Marcel Duchamp.

1: *Video Chess* (1969-75) 25 x 29 inches, plywood, glass, plastic, and one single channel videotape, one 12-inch TV set.

"There is no solution,  
because  
there is no problem." — Marcel Duchamp  
"There is no problem,  
because  
there is no solution." — Shigeko

I met Marcel Duchamp on an American Airline flight to Buffalo for the opening of *Walk Around Time* by Merce Cunningham. It was a cold winter in 1968. The airplane couldn't land at the airport in Buffalo because there was a blizzard from Niagara Falls. We landed at the airport in Rochester, then took a bus to Buffalo. In Toronto, later in 1968, I photographed Marcel and John Cage playing chess at the *Reunion* concert.

In 1972-73, these pictures were transferred, keyed, matted, and colorized at the Experimental TV Center in Binghamton, N.Y., with the assistance of Ken Dominik, and later at WNHT-TV Lab in New York.

In 1975 I made a sculptural entity utilizing this videotape, concluding the piece after seven years. A video monitor looks up, its back parallel to the floor. A transparent chess board with transparent chess pieces sits above the TV monitor. The monitor plays the videotape of Mr. Duchamp and Mr. Cage, and emits the original soundtrack of the unforgettable concert, a composition of John Cage. Every crosspoint of the chess matrix has a hole and a light cell, which are modulated by the proceedings of the chess game. This rich sound inter-modulated system was painstakingly designed and operated by virtuoso electronic musicians/composers, David Tudor, David Behrman, Gordon Mumma, and Lowell Cross.

TV is always somewhere between dream and reality. When you and your chess partner play *Video Chess*, you are accompanied by the videotape of the two great masters playing from the other side of this world.

Two other friends helped me, George Maciunas and Al Robbins. George is gone, to "Higan" (the otherside).

2: *Marcel Duchamp's Grave* (1972-75). Videotaped, 1972, colorized, 1975. Plywood construction, mirror and projected slides, 36 inches wide, height depends on distance from floor to ceiling. One videotape, 12 or more 7-inch TV sets; audio: natural sound of wind in the cemetery in Rouen, France.

"D'ailleurs, c'est toujours les autres qui meurt."  
(By the way, it is always others who die.)  
— Marcel Duchamp  
"Video without Video,  
Communication with Death."  
— Shigeko

In 1972 I visited Marcel Duchamp's grave. I took my blue book, *Marcel Duchamp and John Cage*, with me. It was a very windy day. I took a train from Paris to Rouen, then took a cab to his cemetery. There were two entrances. I didn't know which one to take. At the flower shop nearby the cemetery, I asked a woman, "Where is Marcel Duchamp's grave?" She looked at me and said, "Who is he?" Then, she opened the telephone book. I was very shocked. Alone, after a long search in the vast cemetery, the weight of my porta-pack crushing on my shoulder, I finally found Duchamp's grave next to that of Jacques Villon, his brother. Marcel's ironic epitaph surprised me... *D'ailleurs, c'est toujours les autres qui meurt.*

Despite the cool, nonsentimentality of Duchamp's own attitude to death, I was very moved. My father's family, descended of monks, owns a monastery in the hinterlands of Japan, so I used to see a lot of funerals. I often did homework inside a temple room where fresh bones were stored. How I played with ghosts... all these childhood memories flashed back to my head. I put my "Duchamp and Cage" book on his grave, as in the Oriental family custom of putting rice cookies on the dead ancestor's altar.

3: *Meta-Marcel: Window* (1976). 23 x 31 inches. Electronic video show on one 24-inch TV set. Plywood construction with glass.  
"Video is the window of yesterday.  
Video is the window of tomorrow.  
It snows in my video window as it snows in my mind."  
— Shigeko

I made a small version of Duchamp's *Fresh Window*, using plywood. Inside, an old RCA color TV is set behind the glass window. A character generator produces a snow pattern. The TV set has imperfect purity of color, so the snow becomes surreally tinted. So simple, clear, pure, my window is the quintessential video sculpture, a means to glimpse and grasp the birth of a new genre.

4: *Meta-Marcel: Door* (1976-77). Two door frames: 24 x 82 inches. Plywood construction, with one videotape and two 12-inch monitors.  
"Door.  
Door to open your mind.  
Door to close your mind."  
— Shigeko

I constructed a small room inside the René Block Gallery in New York in 1977. When one goes into the room and shuts the door, it gives the feeling of being inside a cave or a time tunnel. The door's frame is like that of Duchamp's *Door: Ifue Lenny*: with two frames at 90° angles for one door, which always opening/closing at the same time. In China there are quite a few mystery stories with the theme of time tunnels... you stumble into a cave; or, taking a nap, you meet a handsome guide who leads you inside the cave. Walking a distance, you arrive at a palace where you marry the prince, get rich, and become a queen. Suddenly, you awaken from the dream, you are back in reality, but 500 years have passed, you don't see any of your friends, no one remembers you. Mysteries of time, time-warps, occur frequently in fiction. When you enter by my Duchampiana door, you enter a time tunnel. Mr. Duchamp is there smoking a cigar, as in his last concert before departing to the other world. He blends into the superimposed view of steam from Yellowstone's Old Faithful, dutifully blowing off every hour for eternity. Duchamp himself can be heard, "Art is mirage... Art is... Mirage... Art is Mirage."

Someone called this my *Vico-Video*, after Vico, the Italian philosopher (1698-1744) who believed in the eternal recycling of our Karma.

"Another thing which has influenced me profoundly is that Shigeko discovered death for video. Videotaped death is not a simple death. Whereas you can term the real life a two-way communication, videotaped death is a one-way communication. Instead of asking the Biblical question, 'Is there life after death?', she formulated a new question, 'Is there video after death?' As there is life and plastic life, so there will be a death and plastic death. Her innovations will become extremely real and pertinent when artificial hybridation (cyrogenics) becomes practical in a few decades."  
— Nam June Paik

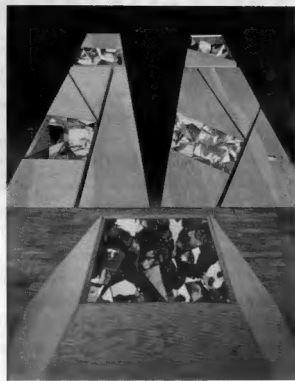


Photo Credit: Peter Moore

5: *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1976). 91 x 67 x 67 inches. Plywood construction, one videotape with video and super 8 film mixed, four 13-inch TV sets, and one 9-inch TV set.

"Video is Vacant Apartment.  
Video is Vacation of Art.  
Viva Video. . ."

—Shigeo

In the original oil painting, Duchamp showed an abstract nude in "motion." But he was restricted to a quasi-futuristic representation of time, . . . that is, multilinear motion depiction. The four-dimensional medium of video knows no such restriction. I constructed a real staircase, made of four color monitors; a lovely nude woman, Shirley McClaughlin, descends slowly/rapidly/flying in many colors and exposures. The image might live within the sculpture. I developed a sort of visual range that repeats itself every three minutes, yet still keeps the attention of the viewer. Packaging and parceling of the temporal structure in video sculpture require special care and consideration.

"Her video dissects, transforms, and restructures the concept of time, just as a chess game dissects, transforms, and restructures the concept of chance."

—Jonathan Price

I want to create a fusion of art and life, Asia and America, Duchampian modernism and Levi-Straussian savagism, cool form and hot video, dealing with all of those complex problems, spanning the tribal memory of the nomadic Asians who crossed over the Bering Strait over 10,000 years ago. Then, I came, flying in a Boeing 707, on July 4th in 1964, drawn to the glittering Pop Art world of New York.

Although the descendants of the great Mohawk Nation did much of the high steel work on New York's skyscrapers, my reunion with my ancient cousins came in a dry desert amid lonely sandstone spires, with the Navajo people. My friendship with the Michel-Sandovar family started with Duggie Mitchell, an outstanding American Indian musician, at Wesleyan University, in 1968. Duggie, there as a teaching fellow in ethnomusicology, had an ebullient, partially nihilistic lifestyle. We used to converse in Japanese, his broken Navajo-Japanese. He met a mysterious death at the age of 25. The mourning of his untimely departure led to the formation and presentation of a multiracial group of four women artists, "White, Black, Red, and Yellow," with Mary Lucier, Charlotte Warren, Cecilia Sandovar (Duggie's cousin, and myself. In 1973, Mary Lucier and I followed Cecilia to her home town in Chinle, Arizona. We stayed with their matrilineal family, lived their lives, experienced some of their rites and festivals. Generally speaking, I was treated with exceptional warmth. An elder man told me, "Oh, poor Japanese, you traveled so long to such a small island, you should have stayed here in America." I laughed. This old man thinks that the Native American emigrated to China and founded Chinese civilization in 4000 B.C. Another person told me that my name, Shigeo, means "daughter-in-law" in the Navajo language. The Navajo word for hello, pronounced, *ya-tu-hei, ya-tu-hei*, means "Love me, love me" in Japanese.

The landscape of the Navajo enchanted me: the incredible colors of Arizona, the skys of the high desert. When I finally had to leave, I resolved to return. In 1976 I traveled throughout western America, recording the landscape in color video in the mountains of Washington, Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, and the deserts and canyons of Utah, Arizona, and New Mexico.

*Three Mountains* (1976-79). Mountain 1: 59 inches wide at base, 38 inches high, 17 inches wide at top. Mountain 2 and 3: 67 inches high, 100/60 inches wide at base, 21 inches wide at top. Plywood construction with mirrors, two 5-inch TV sets, five 13-inch TV sets.

Channel 1: Grand Canyon helicopter trip  
Channel 2: Drive on Echo Cliff, Arizona  
Channel 3: Tacos sunset, mirage  
Channel 4: Teton sunset

Many great ancient sculptural works—Stonehenge, the Pyramids, Peru's Nazca Lines—bear within their grand scale and precisely composed form another, religious and reflexive, dimension. Sculpture mirrors nature while containing the imprint, the consciousness of its

maker.

"Mountain—womb  
My womb is a volcano.  
5-inch and 11-inch image are dancing inside of it.  
They sing of my history."  
—Shigeo

Herbert Read wrote in 1964 that "From its inception in prehistoric times down through the ages, and until comparatively recently, sculpture was conceived as an art of solid form, of MASS, and its virtues were related to spatial occupancy." Video's incursion into sculptural territory will negate the long-held prejudices concerning video that suggest that video is "fragile," "superficial," "temporal," and "instant."

People wonder why I am making mountains.  
"Why do I climb the mountain?" Not, "Because it is there," a colonialist/imperialist notion; but, to perceive to SEE.

The mountains provide a visual storm of perceptual complexity in a setting of almost incomprehensible mass and volume.

—drove as fast as possible, faster than body speed, drove on the highway in Arizona called the Echo-Cliff, from the north grand canyon to the south grand canyon through Navajo reservation, grabbed my camera with both hands, the wind was hitting the microphone out of the window of the car—the sound echos faster than mental speed, it sounds like the Indian kids are riding the horse, drumming for the rain-dance ceremony.

O ji ya, "a small valley of a thousand rocks" is the name of my ancestor's village. I was born in the snow country, in a mountain village in Japan. My grandfather was a Sumie painter. He spent his entire life painting only mountains. As a student, I climbed in the Japanese Alps. I camped for weeks on the slope of Mt. Fuji during the winter snows. Snow in the mountains is like video and sculpture: lightness, speed, the ephemeral quality of the electron set against an unmoving, timeless mass.

My mountains exist in fractured and distended time and space. My vanishing point is reversed, located behind your brain. Then, distorted by mirrors and angles, it vanishes in many points at once. Lines of perspective stretch on and on, crossing at steep angles, sharp like cold, thin mountain air. Time flies and sits still, no contradiction.

"Buckminster Fuller—explains that men leaving Asia to go to Europe went against the wind and developed machines, ideas and occidental philosophies in accord with a struggle against nature; that, on the other hand, men leaving Asia to go to America went with the wind, put up a sail, and developed ideas and oriental philosophies in accord with an acceptance of nature. These two tendencies met in America, producing a movement into the air, not bound to the past, traditions, or whatever."  
John Cage, *Silence*, 1958